

**Jacob K. Javits Oral History Interview – RFK#2, 04/10/1973**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Jacob K. Javits  
**Interviewer:** Roberta Greene  
**Date of Interview:** April 10, 1973  
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**Length:** 5 pages

**Biographical Note**

Javits was a Senator from New York from 1957 through 1981. In this interview Javits discusses working with Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] on the Bedford-Stuyvesant project and the impact of RFK's death on the project, among other issues.

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By JACOB JAVITS

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July 29, 1974

Second Oral History Interview

with

Senator Jacob Javits

April 10, 1973  
Washington, D.C.

By Roberta Greene

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History  
Program of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: Well, I just had some more specifics on Bedford-Stuyvesant, beyond what Mr. vanden Heuvel covered. In the early stages of the project, there was some debate about its scope, both in terms of the geographic area that would be included, and it mentions the early activities. Do you remember discussing this with Robert Kennedy and expressing an opinion on it?

JAVITS: Yes. We did discuss it in the early stages when he was putting the project together. My own opinion was that it should be confined to an area which encompassed the areas of need; that we should not endeavor to include supporting areas which might deteriorate as Bedford-Stuyvesant deteriorated at first. That is just the outside parameters. As to the inside, I felt that a great emphasis should be placed upon the principal business street, as kind of a showplace which gave the first impression of what could be accomplished. This was very important for any officials or private people who would be willing to contribute and come into the area to get a more favorable impression than they otherwise would. That still is the case and that was one of the reasons why I think the major focus, at least in the first instance, was placed upon the Sheffield [Farms building] plant which connected to the main business street.

GREENE: What about your thoughts about the kind of things that they should be starting with? I know that there was some emphasis by [Franklin A.] Frank Thomas to get into things that were



readily visible to give the appearance of success. Did you think that the kinds of projects he was suggesting were too small?

JAVITS: No, I think you had to proceed on two levels. First, you had to have certain cosmetics to attract interest and support, and I think it worked. When they did a beautiful block, or beautified or painted and repaired the fronts of single and two-family houses, paid attention to fences and little gardens, it had a very considerable impact, especially the self-help renovation and repair. And the other level, of course, was to bring some business into the community and to engage in the reconstruction of a commercial area and to put some housing into the area. So I believe that that was right to proceed, one, on the cosmetic level. After all, people have to live and have some feeling about life. And the other, on the more substantial level, beginning with the possibility of jobs in the community, and leading also into education in the community, like the Opportunities Industrialization Center and another manpower training program, and financing the community, which was contributed to very heavily by George Moore [George S. Moore], a former president of the First National City Bank of New York, and a \$100 million mortgage pool for which he was so heavily responsible.

GREENE: Would you say, in general, you and the senator were in agreement on this direction?

JAVITS: I don't know of anything in connection with Bedford-Stuyvesant insofar as I was consulted, or my representatives on the board, which--I always had a representative on the board--had to pass on anything where we were not entirely in agreement.

GREENE: Do you remember much about the shake-up in April of '67 when the board was expanded and reorganized? Some people say that the project really began from that point.

JAVITS: Well, I think that's right. I did know a good deal about that, though I was not directly in charge of it, but naturally people sought my ear or so on. I was not really happy about the two-corporation concept. It sort of separated blacks from whites. But, fortunately, in Franklin Thomas and then in John Doar [John M. Doar] you had such gifted individuals as to bridge what might have been a gap in the division. But I deprecated the strained relationship between Judge [Thomas R.] Jones and Franklin Thomas and I still do. I think it was most unfortunate. But these things happen and you simply have to take them in stride. Sometimes they serve to be an incentive rather than a deterrent. And I hope in this case that's the way it worked out.

GREENE: How much of an argument did you put up against the two-board structure? Was it brought to you at a point where it could

have been changed, or was it already, kind of . . . ?

JAVITS: No. I think it was absolutely solid, in this situation. I deprecated it but there wasn't much that could be done. I think that the members of the board of the Development[ & Services] Corporation, as well as the members of Restoration [Corporation], both were absolutely convinced that there was no other way to do it, and having started that it would have introduced more problems. But in the south Bronx where I am now active, I've tried the other course, as a single board operation, and we don't know yet whether mine will work better than Bobby's.

GREENE: Have your feelings about the two-board operation over there changed, or you're still not satisfied?

JAVITS: Well, I wouldn't say I'm not satisfied. The thing's too far along not to be satisfied. Nor can one say it would have done better the other way. It's just that my preference is for a single board structure which would be completely integrated. And it still is my preference.

GREENE: Did you ever discuss that with Robert Kennedy on a--I hate to use the word philosophical because I know he really didn't talk in those terms-but on a philosophical level in terms of it looking like a plantation set-up, which I think was once said?

JAVITS: No. I don't think I did because I respected too much his dedication to the ideal of being color-blind. And I don't think it had the remotest connotation of that kind. I think he had simply set it up in the way in which he thought would attract the most strength, financial and business and community, to the whole project and I could not. . . . It would have been most unfair to take him to task for a philosophic point in this matter, as he had no such design or purpose.

GREENE: Oh, yes, I really didn't mean to imply that that was his purpose, but that's how some people in the community seemed to have interpreted it.

JAVITS: I think they're wrong, and there's <sup>not</sup> the remotest bit of justification for it.

GREENE: You know, you put a lot of time and interest and energy into this project, and I wonder if, especially while the senator was alive, you ever had the feeling that you weren't given adequate credit?



JAVITS: Oh no. That's nonsense. We are collaborators. This was his baby and I always regarded it as such, just as he would have regarded whatever was mine as mine with as much respect. No, that never bothered me.

GREENE: Could you just comment generally on the impact that you think Robert Kennedy's death had on the project?

JAVITS: Well, I think it was dismay and I think it took a big note of evangelism out of it. And I think they felt that their father, or protector, in Washington was no longer on the scene. I think they derived great satisfaction from the fact that ultimately Ethel (Skakel Kennedy) joined the board, and I'm proud that this was my own suggestion. They found a foster father in me as far as Washington was concerned, but it couldn't possibly be the same to them. And I think it was a terrible loss. I don't think that the project was materially prejudiced by that, but perhaps they would have felt more motivated to do even more. They've done a great deal. I think it's been an extremely advantageous and good project and a very wonderful demonstration of what can be done by community self help, probably the first significant of such projects. But sentimentally and from the point of view of motivation, Bobby Kennedy's loss was very, very keenly felt. And also the satisfaction the local community would feel in achievement under this. I think that they would have enjoyed it much more if he had been around to enjoy it with him.

GREENE: You must commented briefly on Judge Jones and Frank Thomas and John Doar. I wonder how you see the interaction of these personalities and their impact on the project?

JAVITS: Well, I think that they all reacted and did pretty much what you would expect. Jones probably overemphasized what the community itself is capable of contributing, as contrasted with the money people and the management people, and the money and management people probably underestimated how much the community can put in, and what it means in the way of breaking the poverty syndrome if they actually feel that they are running it. But I think fortunately this thing has had Frank Thomas, who is a powerful element of unity between the two ideas, and I think he's kept them pretty much in balance, though in order to do it he's had to take considerable buffeting from the black people or their representatives. But he's been willing to take it and I think it's very loyal.

GREENE: How do you see John Doar's. . . .

JAVITS: Role?

GREENE: . . . position? Yes, role.

JAVITS: I think, again, he was the cooperative factor with Thomas, and he probably knows his way around in areas where Thomas might have found it difficult to move. And I think they're very compensating one to the other.

GREENE: Any comments generally on the membership of the board in the period that Robert Kennedy was around?

JAVITS: No. No, I think he put together a fantastically good board. I helped him with a number of the members that would not have gone on except for me.

GREENE: Could you be specific?

JAVITS: No. I don't wish to be. But that is personal because people had certain suspensions about Bobby that he was very ruthless and very ambitious and so on. But I reassured them, one, that I thought he was doing this for itself and, second, that I was going to be around too. And he succeeded in getting, hence, a very eminent board.

GREENE: How do you think these people--many of them are obvious because they were always staunch Republicans with close ties to you and the government--how do you think their feelings and attitudes toward Senator Kennedy changed in the period they worked with him?

JAVITS: I think they did. I think they liked him.

GREENE: They did.

JAVITS: I think they liked him. I think they found him legitimate and honest and really dedicated to the purpose. And everything I told them about it turned out to be true. Don't forget, too, that [John V.] Lindsay was a Republican at that time, too, so his adherence to the proposition was no inconsiderable factor.

GREENE: Is there anything else?

JAVITS: I think that's it.